

The Quantified Child Under Biopolitical Surveillance: Disability and Maternal Responsibility in Jodi Picoult's *Handle with Care*

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Abstract— Jodi Picoult is an American novelist, renowned for her negotiations with clinical hegemony. Her novel, *Handle with Care* (2009), could be deemed a poignant entry point into the labyrinthine of clinical ethics, disability studies and the pragmatic management of family politics by mothers. Hence, this article is an investigation of the narrative through the lenses of clinical surveillance. It is an examination of the protagonist's intense legal and medical negotiations. Willow O'Keefe, who is the protagonist, is the quantified child, born with Type III Osteogenesis Imperfecta. Central to the examination is the wrongful birth lawsuit initiated by Willow's mother, Charlotte, against her own family doctor. This is the quintessential issue addressed in this article. Thus, the idea of the quantified child stays pivotal in the progression of the novel. This article also attends to those consequences of the legal process that systematically reduces Willow's existence to a series of economic liabilities, incorporated by medical cost and familial limitation. This article is one adamant argument that clinical hegemony demands the commodification of Willow's disability. This quantification reduces the child to the fragmentation of self and, eventually, to the loss of identity. Obviously, the child is stripped of her inherent personhood; she is transformed into a data point within the clinical framework. Hence Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics is utilized in this article, in order to investigate the clinical surveillance of the disabled Willow and the maternal performance by Charlotte, the mother. In *Handle With Care*, Picoult advances the point that the familial sphere is no longer private. The article closes with the finding that *Handle With Care* exposes the dehumanizing gaze of clinical hegemony, which readily views an individual disability through the lens of risk management.



Keywords— *Handle with Care*, disability, biopolitics, wrongful birth lawsuit, quantified child, Type III Osteogenesis Imperfecta, economic liability, personhood, fragmentation of self, hegemony, maternal performance, gaze, risk management.

Jodi Picoult, a renowned American- Jewish writer was born on May 19th, 1966 In Gong Island, New York. This place might be conceived of a landscape that enriched her evolution as character and more specifically a novelist. She is recognised today as a highly acclaimed and bestselling American author known for her exclusive fictional works that resonate with complex ethical dilemma as against like the backdrop of a techno-scientific American white centrist system. She is an educated literary artist.

As of date, Picoult is the New York Times bestselling author of twenty-nine novels, including most recently, the record-breaking recent bestseller *By any other Name* (2021). *Handle With Care* (2009) and *House Rules* (2010) reached number one on the New York Times bestseller's list. Some of her novels, namely, *Playing True* (2004), *The Tenth Circle* (2008) and *My Sisters Keeper* (2009) are but a few of her books adapted for film and T.V. adaptations.

Jodi Picoult's *Handle with Care* (2009) is an emotional novel that deals with family struggles and ethical dilemmas. The novel also deals with medical ethics and legal battles as seen in most of her novels. The story revolves around Charlotte and Sean O' Keefe whose daughter Willow is born with osteogenesis imperfecta OI a severe breaking of the bone disease.

Charlotte and Sean O' Keefe's lives completely take a turn when their second daughter Willow is diagnosed with type 3 OI. She was born with seven broken bones where even the simplest of actions like moving her could break more of hers. Charlotte and Sean find it very difficult to financially support her treatments as she needs constant care due to frequent breakage of bones. Charlotte's best friend, Piper Reece and Obstetrician was the one who oversaw the deformity.

While the family is away on a trip which was unusual due to Willow's illness, Willow breaks one of her bones accidentally, which in turn creates a commotion which leads to a short conviction of Charlotte and Sean. This infuriates Sean who is determined to sue the department after his return home. After approaching a local lawyer, they learn that such an action is not possible but if they want to sue someone for money it could be Piper Reece, Charlotte's friend for wrongful birth. Which implied had she known earlier about Willow's condition she would have terminated the pregnancy.

The decision Charlotte takes to sue her friend shatters their strong bond of friendship and it puts pressure on Sean for lying and it devastates Amelia, the elder daughter who suffers mentally which results in self-harm and bulimia.

Willow is an intelligent child. On learning that her mother might have terminated her pregnancy, if she was aware of her disability, feels unloved. Unable to handle his emotions Sean separates from his family. The trial goes on in the courtroom where each character goes through extreme emotional torment. Charlotte, Sean, Amelia, Piper Reece, her husband and daughter suffer through this equally in their own way.

Finally, Charlotte wins the case but loses everything else. The victory is very short lived as Willow drowns in a frozen pond nearby. Ultimately the money she gains from the victory of her trial for Willow, goes unused. The novel concludes the letter from Charlotte to Willow expressing both her love and regret. The novel ends with a central idea making the reader ponder if the lawsuit was worth suing.

The increasing medicalization has profoundly reshaped understandings of disability and parental responsibility. The contemporary biomedical technologies including prenatal diagnostics have enabled the early

detection of potential abnormalities thereby transforming the unborn child into an object subjected to risk management. Within this framework disability is not a lived experience but a deviation to be measured or monitored.

The existing scholarship on Picoult's work often focuses on ethical dilemmas and legal narratives and there is a critical gap in analyzing the intersection of biopolitics, disability and maternal responsibility. This study argues that *Handle with Care* reproduces biopolitical governance by framing disability through quantification and risk while simultaneously recasting motherhood as surveilled and accountable practice. It also reveals how deeply clinical hegemony penetrates both public and private domains.

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics refers to the mechanisms through which modern states regulate populations by managing life processes such as health reproduction and mortality. Central to this framework is the idea of biopower which operates not through overt coercion but through normalization commerce surveillance and production of knowledge. In the context of disability, biopower manifests through the classification and measurement of bodies. As Leonard J Davis argues the concept of normalcy itself is a statistical construct against which all bodies are evaluated. Similarly, Nicholas Rose extends Foucauldian thought by emphasizing how individuals internalize biomedical norms becoming active participants in their own regulation.

This paper introduces the concept of quantified child to describe how Willow's body is constructed within the novel. She is not just represented as a child with disability but surrendered as a collection of medical data points based on her fracture rates prognosis and treatment costs. This quantification reduces Willow's existence to measurable variables aligning her identity with the logic of biomedical governance.

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in Foucauldian discourse analysis. It also focuses on key narrative sites within the novel. Such as medical consultations judiciary proceedings and maternal reflections.

At the outset, Willow's body is framed through the language of medical classification and statistical risk. Through the novel she is described not as a child in experiential terms but through diagnostic labels and prognostic expectations. Willow is situated within a biomedical taxonomy rather than a living identity. From her birth until her death, Willow gets admitted to the hospital several times due to her fragile bones. Charlotte and Sean struggle to settle the hospital bills. The hospital management does not provide any choice to them, the hospital shows its power over them by pointing to Willow's

fragility of existence, as they keep siphoning money out of their purses. As Charlotte the mother observes:

The treatment was four hours each, for three days in a row. After two hours of multiple nurses and residents coming in to get your vitals... then you'd give a urine sample. After that came the blood draw -- six vials while you clutched my hand so hard you left tiny half – moons with your fingernails on the canvas of my skin. Finally, the nurse would administer the IV-- the part you resisted the most. (83)

These words encapsulate the transformation of Willow from a person into a medico construct. The child's existence is reframed as evidence rather than experience.

In this novel surveillance extends across both clinical and juridical domain. Willow's body is continuously documented and evaluated transforming her into a subject of institutional scrutiny. This is explicitly seen in the courtroom when the argument goes as that the issue is not Willow is loved but how that love is legally represented (Picoult 171) here we find that the legal system appropriates medical authority converting life into a matter of calculation and judgement. The courtroom functions as an extension of the clinic, reinforcing the logic of surveillance.

Charlotte undergoes serious maternal conflicts and the depth of the bio political pressure is seen when she articulates "I love my daughter. But I wish she had never been born" (306). This paradox reflects the fragmentation of maternal identity under the weight of biomedical rationality. Charlotte is positioned as both a caregiver and an accountable subject within a regulatory framework.

We also see that Charlotte justifies her legal action by stating "I need to make sure that Willow was taken care of for the rest of her life" (305) while this appears protective it also reinforces the reduction of life to financial planning and liability. Through the novel, Willow's existence is repeatedly translated into cause thereby aligning her value with economic metrics.

This paper has demonstrated how *Handle with Care* constructs the disabled child as a quantified subject within a biopolitical framework. Through the interplay of medical and legal discourse, Willow's identity is reduced to data risk and economic liability. Familiarly motherhood is configured as surveillance practice governed by expectations of rational decision making and accountability. By applying the theories of Michel Foucault, this study highlights the pervasive influence of biopower in shaping both individual identities and social norms. The novel

reveals how deeply clinical hegemony penetrates the privacy sphere transforming intimate relationships into sites of regulation.

Ultimately, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions in disability studies and literary analysis by foregrounding the ethical implications of quantification and surveillance. It calls for a reevaluation of how disability is represented an understood urging a shift away from reductive frameworks towards more nuanced and humane perspectives.

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